

The CIA in school

The case of the Harvard professor and the Central Intelligence Agency has been settled, at least to Harvard's satisfaction, with both a sentence and an acquittal. But the larger issue of academic cooperation with the CIA remains hotly contended among the Harvard faculty.

The case was this: Nadav Safran, a professor and director of Harvard's Center for Middle Eastern Studies, took a CIA grant for his book, "Saudi Arabia: The Ceaseless Quest for Security," and another to hold a conference on Islamic fundamentalism at Harvard. He was charged with not following Harvard's regulations on reporting outside sponsorship.

Harvard's investigation concluded that Mr. Safran had in fact reported the book grant to his superior. It found that Mr. Safran did not report the conference sponsorship.

Harvard's sentence was that Mr. Safran resign from the Center for Middle Eastern Studies, a resignation accepted "with sadness and deep reservation." The acquittal was in the form of retaining Mr. Safran as a tenured professor, for "his erudition and objectivity as a scholar have not been questioned."

So far, so good. You break your employer's rules, you take your punishment. But some of Mr. Safran's colleagues are outraged at what they view as a whitewash and slapped wrists. "The broader moral issue of what he did was not addressed," declared Richard N. Frye, a professor of Iranian studies who seems to be as explosive as his subject. He even

asserted that "people in the field now have to worry about their lives being in danger." Another colleague, otherwise sympathetic, maintained that the case has "affected the credibility of all Harvard."

This surely overdraws the issue. CIA relations with academia were put into more realistic perspective by a CIA director who could hardly be described as a nefarious manipulator. In his half-memoir, half-essay "Secrecy and Democracy," President Carter's Director of Central Intelligence Stansfield Turner explains:

"What did we want these academics to do? The primary need for contact between the CIA and academia is to share ideas on all manner of world affairs, ranging from the psychology of foreign leaders to the state of world oil production to the strength of Islamic fundamentalism. The CIA, like every research and analytic institution, must be able to test its views and conclusions against the thinking of other experts. Through one-year fellowships, through committees of academics who periodically reviewed the CIA's work, and through individual consulting arrangements, we sought to tap the wisdom of academia."

There exists, admittedly, a potential for abuse, and schools have the right to protect their reputation and academic freedom. But a school's or a professor's limited relationship with the CIA should not be considered, per se, morally or professionally compromising — any more, notes Adm. Turner, than similar relationships with corporations, foundations or other government agencies.